



Two-wheeled trailblazers

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Suzanne Nowicki of the Laboratory's Space Sciences and Applications group and her graduate student Elinor Mullin, work their way through a trail in the mountains of Los Alamos. The two are not hiking but rather are riding sturdy mountain bikes with chunky tires and suspension.

Taking the lead, Suzanne shifts her bike into a lower gear as she works up a steep incline. Several yards behind Suzanne, Ellie eases the brakes on her bike as she makes a descent, using the bike's straight handlebars to avoid obstacles on the trail.

"I learned how to mountain bike while in college," explains Ellie. "I have friends who go out on trails, and I really wanted to join them. I asked one of my friends to teach me the basics, and it just went from there."

"My inspiration is not as exciting as Ellie's," laughs Suzanne. "I started off with traditional biking, using my street bike on occasion to travel to work. Last year, I joined Ellie on a mountain-bike excursion, and I really liked it."

"It's difficult at first," says Suzanne, "but I stuck with it, eventually becoming better and better at it, learning skills that involve jumping, balance and how best to handle the bike when overcoming obstacles. It's really fun for me now."

Hitting the trails

"What I really like about trail riding is that I can cover much more distance than I could while hiking," says Suzanne. "The forests and mountains of New Mexico are so beautiful, and I found that I could see so much more while aboard my mountain bike."

Suzanne Nowicki navigating a stretch of singletrack.

"Street biking is somewhat about speed—if you take it easy on the road, though, it's really a care-free activity," adds Ellie. "Mountain biking is really about focus. You really need to stay alert, as the trail ahead of you differs from moment to moment. You need to plan on how to overcome any given obstacles you are going to face—often, you have to make decisions in a matter of seconds, as obstacles on the trail appear in front of you from only feet away. Overcoming challenges—that's what I really like about mountain biking."

Skills come with time

Beginners may find that mountain biking is a challenging sport, as the likelihood of falling off the bike while on a trail is high. Both Suzanne and Ellie have experienced injuries while mountain biking, but both have remained tenacious in practicing the sport.

“You have to be patient when it comes to mountain biking,” says Ellie. “Some trails will prove very challenging. You may fall down a lot at the beginning. But as you progress, your skills will grow and you will wind up having a lot of fun.”

“It does take time,” adds Suzanne. “You will not be able to master the skills after just one outing. Accessing such remote places while mountain biking, it is very satisfying to me. It lets me clear my mind.”

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